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‘WE SOLEMNLY PROSCRIBE THIS POEM’: PERFORMATIVE UTTERANCES IN THE ROMANTIC PERIODICALS

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Abstract:

This essay argues that many of the characteristic procedures of periodical writing in the Romantic period, such as accusing, ridiculing, insulting, libelling, condemning, judging, applauding, indicting, recommending, advising, or censoring, are best understood as performative utterances. Performative utterances can only be ‘felicitous’ (in J.L. Austin’s terms) if they are spoken by an authorized person in a recognised context; that authority must pre-exist the utterance. Romantic periodical writers faced the double challenge of establishing themselves as authorities on their culture, and establishing periodical writing as the appropriate context in which to exercise this authority. Their authority could only be located in their writing itself: as a result they created a self-authorising style. That style was iterable: it gained its power through periodical reiteration. It was also citational: it relied first on citing existing forms of authority and then on citing its own earlier iterations. It could be used to define public figures, including other periodical writers. But, as a result, it could also be turned against the periodical writers who deployed it. Creatures of writing, made out of language, they could be unmade in language too.

Paper:

Commentating on the world around them was not enough for the most ambitious periodical writers of the early nineteenth century. Not content with describing the world, they agreed with Karl Marx (a periodical writer and editor himself) that the point was to change it. Employing a range of rhetorical strategies to shape the culture they inhabited, they evolved a style of writing with activist aspirations that aimed not simply to encourage or persuade people to do things, but actually to do things itself. Jon Klancher influentially argued that periodicals were responsible for making English reading audiences, and in particular for helping to bring into being a middle-

class audience that was conscious of its own distinct identity and its cultural power. But before periodical writers could make audiences, they had to make themselves, constructing a position of authority from whence they could produce effects in the world. They made themselves in language, and more specifically in *style*, in a kind of style whose authority, finally, rested nowhere but in the style itself.

Their style did not reflect the periodical writers' power to define their readers' experience of the world they inhabited – it was that power. It aspired to produce effects that were not only perlocutionary but also illocutionary, so that when the periodical writers commented on the culture around them they were not making observations or offering opinions, but pronouncing verdicts and handing down judgments. But while the legal authorities that they took as one of their models were well established, with an authority grounded in the state's unwritten constitution or the social contract, the periodical writers sought simultaneously to exercise power and to construct the conditions that legitimated the exercise of that power. The task facing the young men (and some women) who produced early-nineteenth-century periodicals, then, was to found a discursive regime that would actually give them the status of cultural arbiters that they freely claimed for themselves.

Performative utterances were an important rhetorical weapon in this campaign. J.L. Austin identified performative utterances as those that accomplish something in the act of being uttered. For example, the utterance, 'I name this ship', uttered in the right circumstances and by the right person, constitutes the act of naming the ship in itself, rather than describing an act of naming that has taken place, or will take place, elsewhere. This utterance is therefore not a statement of fact or belief, or a commentary on an act that exists apart from the utterance. The utterance is the act. Forms such as 'I name', 'I pronounce', 'I bet' and so on, if uttered in appropriate circumstances, bring about a new state of affairs, rather than describing an existing one. More generally, Austin distinguishes the 'illocutionary' force of an utterance (the act I perform in saying it) from its 'perlocutionary' force (the effect I bring about by saying it). So, for example, if I say that you should accept a job offer, Austin would distinguish between two things that occur: the illocutionary act is to *advise* you to accept, the perlocutionary effect may be to *convince* you to accept (Austin 102). But whether or not I convince you, there's no denying that I advised you, because the illocutionary act was carried out in the utterance itself, not as a

result of it. Periodical writing's characteristic procedures – accusing, ridiculing, insulting, libelling, condemning, judging, applauding, indicting, recommending, advising, censuring – can all be understood as performative utterances.

Performatives are not statements, and so they cannot be described as either true or false, but only as 'felicitous' or 'infelicitous' (in Austin's terms). Either the utterance successfully performs an act (the ship is named, the bet is made, and so on) or it misfires in various ways. So, for example, if the phrase 'I name this ship' is uttered, but not by the person authorised to do so, or not on the appropriate occasion, we shall agree that the ship has not, in fact, been named. At the end of *Coriolanus* Act III, Sicinius, one of the tribunes of the people, pronounces the sentence of banishment on Coriolanus in a ceremonial performative utterance:

[I]n the name a' th' people,
And in the power of us the tribunes, we,
Even from this instant, banish him our city,
In peril of precipitation
From off the rock Tarpeian, never more
To enter our Rome gates. I' th' people's name,
I say it shall be so. (III.iii.99-105)

Here the sentence of banishment is performed in the act of uttering 'we [...] banish him'. Sicinius ceremonially embeds that performative utterance in a context that makes it felicitous. He starts by establishing his authority to utter the performative ('in the name a' th' people, / And in the power of us the tribunes'), makes clear that the sentence is enacted in the moment of utterance ('even from this instant'), reminds Coriolanus that he is in a position to enforce it ('In peril of precipitation / From off the rock Tarpeian'), and concludes by reiterating it in a form that reflexively foregrounds the power of his own speech act ('I say it shall be so'). Sicinius insists on his authority partly because it is under threat in the power struggle between the nobles and the tribunes. Earlier in the scene he and Brutus have stage-managed the people to shout their support and 'with a din confus'd / Enforce the present execution / Of what we chance to sentence' (III.iii.20-22). But his insistence pays off, his performative utterance is felicitous, and Coriolanus is indeed banished. Coriolanus's response attempts a performative utterance of his

own – ‘I banish you!’ (III.iii.123). He draws on his aristocratic sense that he should be exercising authority, not submitting to it, but his performative utterance cannot be felicitous, because he is not authorised, on this occasion, to pronounce the sentence of banishment. His utterance appeals to a higher justice, but it misfires as a performative; it is arrogant but impotent. Coriolanus leaves Rome and the tribunes stay.

That performative utterance ‘I banish you’ is repeated again and again, in various forms, in the reviews in Romantic periodicals. I banish this poem from the libraries of our readers, I banish this poet from the ranks of genius, I banish this idea from the minds of right-thinking people. Who is entitled to utter this performative, and in what circumstances? For the performative utterances of the periodical writers to be felicitous, two conditions had to be met. Firstly, the writers had to be recognised as people authorised to utter them, and secondly the periodicals had to be recognised as the appropriate venue for such pronouncements. If these two conditions were met, then the periodicals could make a person praiseworthy or reprehensible by praising or reprehending that person. Their utterances were like Sicinius’s performative, which actually does banish Coriolanus. If they were not met, then the periodicals’ praise or reprehension was just one opinion among many, with no special force. Their utterances were like Coriolanus’s performative, which despite sounding noble, banishes no one.

In Chapter 2 of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge attacked periodical writers as, ‘men, who being first scriblers [sic] from idleness and ignorance next become libellers from envy and malevolence’ (I, 41). The connection between periodical writing and libel, commonly made in the Romantic period, is related to a specific legal understanding of libel that illuminates its performative character. William Blackstone, the authority on English law in the period, defined libels as ‘malicious defamations of any person [...] made public by either printing, writing, signs or pictures, in order to provoke him to wrath, or expose him to public hatred, contempt, and ridicule’ (150). In civil law a libel was understood as a kind of personal injury or damage to property or livelihood (insofar as one’s reputation was a property, and having it tarnished could damage one’s livelihood). Proving that the facts stated were true was therefore sufficient to get a libel case dismissed in civil court. In criminal law, however, a libel was understood to be a kind of breach of the peace, which stirred up unrest, retribution and violence in the community. In this case it did not matter to the law whether the statement was true or not, as Blackstone

explained: ‘it is immaterial with respect to the offence of a libel, whether the matter of it be true or false; since the provocation, and not the falsity, is the thing to be punished criminally’ (150).¹

Libels were therefore an especially problematic form of public discourse, because their truthfulness was not sufficient to make them acceptable, and their falsity was not sufficient to nullify their power. Libels are effectively considered in criminal law as performative utterances, rather than statements making truth claims. They may, indeed, entail statements whose truth can apparently be verified by the facts of the matter: when *Blackwood’s* called William Hazlitt ‘pimpled Hazlitt’, he either did or did not have pimples on his face. But the truthfulness is beside the point. Such utterances bring about a state of affairs, and do not represent one: ridiculing Leigh Hunt did not mean describing something that was ridiculous about him, it meant making him ridiculous. (‘Here we should say that in saying these words we are *doing* something [...] rather than *reporting* something’, Austin writes (13).) There is no explicit form of words in common usage ‘I insult you’ or ‘I libel you’: these are implicit performatives that cannot be reduced to explicit forms.²

Before they could speak with authority, periodical writers needed a position of authority from which to speak *ex cathedra*, ‘with all the seriousness that befits our high office’ (as the *Monthly Review* put it in its review of Southey’s *Roderick* (Anon., 226). Sicinius banished Coriolanus ‘in the name a’ th’ people, / And in the power of us the tribunes’. What comparable claim could the periodical writers make? Their pronouncements always implied a prior, tacit and tautologous assertion of the authority to make pronouncements. A key issue for periodical writers – especially in the early issues of new periodicals – was to establish themselves as having the authority to pronounce judgments on their culture and to establish periodicals as an appropriate venue in which to do so.

For example, when a reviewer writes, ‘we solemnly proscribe this poem from the English fireside’, or declares that the ‘sentence of excommunication from the poets of England has been pronounced, enrolled, and ratified’, the issue at stake is whether such an utterance can be a felicitous performative (Roberts 463; Mason V, 186). Do the periodical writers have the authority to pass judgements in the way that they do, or are these utterances a kind of parody of legal, ecclesiastical, medical or royal pronouncements, which borrow an authoritative-sounding

form of words, but without any inherent authority? To negotiate this question, these two performative utterances both sought to bolster their authority by appealing to external support. In the first case, the *Monthly Review* wrote ‘we solemnly proscribe this poem from the English fireside, and summon all that religion, morality and policy enjoin to give authority to the interdict.’ In the second case, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* wrote ‘the public voice has been lifted up against Hunt, – and the sentence of excommunication from the poets of England has been pronounced, enrolled, and ratified.’ Just as Sicinius claims to speak for the Roman citizens, the periodical writers claimed to speak with an authority that was not their own, but was vested in them by something else – religion, morality, policy, or public consensus. A shared, social authority spoke through the mouthpiece of the periodicals. In fact, however, the periodicals sought to create the consensus they invoked by behaving as though it already existed. It was not clear to all readers that religion, morality and policy did in fact support the periodical’s pronouncement. But by behaving as though it were, the periodical tried to construct a consensus about religion, morality and policy among its readers that authorised its performative utterance. The periodicals, then, invoked existing authorities not to subordinate themselves to them, but to establish themselves alongside them.

Among the authoritative discourses evoked was the code of conduct for a gentleman. Richard Cronin uses two duels fought between writers in the years after Waterloo as the starting point for his analysis of two key factors shaping the period’s literary culture: its increasingly polarised and acrimonious disagreements and its pervasive concern with the social status of those who made their living from writing. Gentlemen traditionally had no profession, living instead on private means. By this criterion most periodical writers were ineligible. But a gentleman could also be recognised by his modes of speech and especially his authority to utter certain performatives – such as ‘I challenge you’ in the code of duelling.³ On Cronin’s account, part of the periodical writers’ project was to establish themselves as a cadre of professional writers with the social status of gentlemen. They asserted that status by employing a performative utterance – the challenge – that was only available to gentlemen. They revealed the tenuousness of their status when they betrayed their ignorance of the finer points of duelling culture – sometimes with fatal results.

This anxiety about their social status shows that, when they sought to give their writing illocutionary force, the periodical writers could not rely on a position of established authority. For Austin, the performative utterance ‘I name this ship’ only works if uttered by someone with the authority to name this particular ship. That authority is established elsewhere and prior to the utterance: saying ‘I name this ship’ cannot in itself give you the authority to name ships. This, however, is exactly the task the periodical writers set for themselves: to cultivate a self-authorising style, which would simultaneously establish their authority as cultural arbiters and exercise that authority. Indeed, the authority was established by exercising it, in the act of exercising it. The self-authorising style, then, had a double illocutionary force that both performed an action and performed the authority to execute that action. It was akin to what Angela Esterhammer identifies as a specifically ‘Romantic performative’. Esterhammer uncovers precursors to the modern debate about performatives in the language philosophy of the Romantic period, but she argues that Romantic thinkers tended to assign less fixed roles to speaker and hearer than modern philosophers do. The Romantic performative constitutes the identities of speaker and hearer and the relationship between them. Performative utterances in periodicals are of this sort. They are not acts within an existing discursive regime, but part of an effort to found a discursive regime – one that would constitute and unite a middle-class reading audience (as Klancher argues) and a professional class of writers (as Cronin claims).

The self-authorising style was tailor-made for periodical writing because it enforced its illocutionary acts of cultural definition by periodical iteration. When a periodical ridiculed or condemned, praised or recommended, it performed an act in the dual present of reading and writing, but that act took place with reference to other acts that had occurred in the past or were projected in the future. Judith Butler draws attention to the way in which performatives are ritualised and thus located in relation to repetition:

The illocutionary speech act performs its deed *at the moment* of the utterance, and yet to the extent that the moment is ritualized, it is never merely a single moment. The ‘moment’ in ritual is a condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance. (3)

Periodical publication meant that any utterance in a review or magazine was likewise constituted in relation to past and future iterations. While this applies to periodical publication *per se*, it is especially characteristic of series, which were a key tool for constructing periodical authority. Whether in formal numbered series such as those on the ‘Cockney School’ or ‘Lake School’ in *Blackwood’s*, or in looser series such as Jeffrey’s repeated attacks on Wordsworth in the *Edinburgh*, organising articles serially helped to establish their authority.

Periodical pronouncements reinforced their authority by referring backwards to what the magazine had already achieved (‘Before we appeared, the art of criticism was indeed a truly miserable concern’, *Blackwood’s* claimed, ‘We put an end to this in six months’) and forwards to what it would do (Z. ended the fifth Cockney school article by promising Hunt ‘we shall come back to thee anon’) (‘Preface’, 22; *Mason* V, 278). Keats registered the effectiveness of this strategy when he worried about being the subject of a future *Blackwood’s* article. ‘There has been a flaming attack on Hunt in [Blackwood’s] Edinburgh Magazine’ he wrote. ‘I never read anything so virulent – accusing him of the greatest Crimes [...] I have no doubt that the second Number was intended for me’ (Rollins 180). One way in which periodical writers enforced their authority to make judgments with illocutionary force was to reiterate those judgments periodically.

But while the self-authorising style was powerfully iterable, it was also citational. The authority of the periodicals’ pronouncements never quite managed to inhere in the pronouncements themselves, but did so only with reference to other pronouncements. Derrida makes clear that this is a condition of performatives in general:

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not identifiable in some way as a ‘citation’? (18)

The marriage ceremony, for example, only ‘works’ – only has the illocutionary force ascribed to it – because we know it has worked in the past. It’s difficult to imagine the ‘first’ marriage ceremony. The Romantic periodicals sought to found a new position of cultural authority, but

could only do so by citing existing authorities. The self-authorising style of the Romantic periodicals could not give birth to itself *sui generis*. It therefore cited legal, ecclesiastical, medical and monarchical formulae of authoritative speech, as well as literary precursors such as the moral essays of Johnson, Addison and Steele, or the Junius Letters.

In seeking to prop itself against these existing forms of authoritative utterance, the self-authorising style often employed them ironically. The examples cited above offer the periodicals' sentence of banishment as a self-consciously parodic imitation of actual banishment. Figurative excommunication from the republic of letters was pronounced in deliberately outsized rhetoric. Irony protected the periodical writers from difficult questions about the status of their authority and the effectiveness of their pronouncements, while allowing an emergent form of authority to appear as an ironic citation of existing forms of authority. Nonetheless, it aimed to move beyond these other authorities, to elide them, in order to generate its own authority through periodical reiteration. Once this point of autonomy was reached, the performatives uttered in periodicals worked by citing earlier performatives uttered in periodicals, rather than by citing utterances from elsewhere. Habituated by legal training, which many of them had received, to the weight of precedents found in case law rather than enshrined in a legal code, periodical writers understood the authority of custom and practice. Having reached a certain critical mass, the style of the periodical writers ceased to prop itself up on external sources of authority and became self-sustaining: an authority unto itself.

The point of cultivating an authoritative style was to perform effective acts of cultural definition that would shape the profiles of public individuals and call readers into socio-cultural groups organised around shared perceptions, concerns and prejudices. Such acts of cultural definition involved interpellating readers as members of audiences, but they also involved defining the images of public figures. These two effects were mutually supporting, since one badge of membership in a particular audience was a certain attitude towards particular public figures, and one way in which public figures were defined was by their meaning for a particular audience. In Louis Althusser's classic parable of the role of ideology in subject formation, ideology recruits individuals as subjects like a policeman hailing someone in the street. When you hear the policeman's call and turn around, you identify yourself as the one addressed, and thus as subject to his authority. In Althusser's story, the subject is constituted in language, and

this process of interpellation (from the French *interpeller*, to hail) requires the subject's complicity, even though no individual escapes being hailed as a subject. Judith Butler, however, argues that 'the linguistic constitution of the subject can take place without the subject's knowing, as when one is constituted out of earshot, as, say, the referent of a third-person discourse' (33). The individual's complicity is not, after all, required. 'Indifferent to your protests, the force of interpellation continues to work. One is still constituted by discourse, but at a distance from oneself' (33). Both aspects of the periodicals' work of cultural definition can therefore be understood as interpellations. The readers were complicit in their interpellation as audience members, while the public figures were interpellated 'at a distance' without their complicity.

One does not have to accept that the subject in general is constituted in language, as Althusser, Butler, Lacan and others urge, to see that professional writers in particular are constituted in language. And not only in the language they use (which, of course, is not their own), but also in the ways others speak and write about them. So the key question in, for example, the *Blackwood's* attacks on Leigh Hunt, is not 'what kind of person is Leigh Hunt', nor even 'what kind of writer is Leigh Hunt', but 'who will define Leigh Hunt in the public sphere'? Hunt constructed his own public persona, which remained remarkably consistent across the different forms, genres and venues in which he wrote, including journalism and political commentary, theatre reviews, literary essays and reviews, personal essays and poems. But the *Blackwood's* writers created a rival version of Leigh Hunt, a caricature of aspects of the persona he created for himself. This Hunt was a tea-drinking fop, a coward, a libeller, a radical demagogue, an atheist and an enemy to morality. At stake in the acrimonious exchanges between the *Examiner* and *Blackwood's* is which of these characterisations of Hunt will prevail in the minds of the public, and which periodical, by saying that Hunt is like this or that, will *make* him like this or that in the public imagination. Pierre Bourdieu describes the 'field of cultural production' as:

[T]he site of struggles in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer. (42)

Bourdieu's generalised statement, based primarily on his study of nineteenth-century France, illuminates the dimensions of the particular struggle in which British Romantic periodical writers engaged. Their aim was not so much to win an argument with their opponents, as it was to claim the right to define the nature of the argument. Policing their culture, the periodical writers sought the same kind of defining power as Althusser's policeman: the power to constitute the subjects of the realm whose order they defined and upheld.

But the policeman in Althusser's story is himself interpellated just as much as the passerby. This interpellation doesn't just take place as a prior condition of the policeman's being able to hail another subject in his turn. Instead, it takes place (or is reiterated) in the very act of hailing. The status of the policeman as a subject is somewhat confused by the way in which he slips, in Althusser's anecdote, from being an individual himself to being only an allegorical figure for ideology and its operations. If we read the policeman as a subject in his own right, however, then his shout is a kind of performative utterance, which hails the addressee and the speaker simultaneously. The shout identifies the passerby as subject to his authority, but it also identifies the policeman himself as the voice of authority. If, following Foucault, we reject a top-down model of power as something possessed by some individuals and exercised over others, and think of power instead as something that circulates among individuals, subjecting those apparently in authority as much as those over whom authority is exercised, then we can see the policeman as the object of interpellation too. In ridiculing 'pimpled Hazlitt', periodical writers concurrently rendered Hazlitt ridiculous and constituted themselves as cultural authorities. This dual function of performative utterances – their effect on both speaker and hearer, writer and reader, was part of the secret of the self-authorising style's power, which allowed periodical writers to establish their authority in the act of exercising it. But it also ran the risk of trapping the periodical writers in the very system they cultivated, just as Althusser's policeman is arguably interpellated by ideology just as much as the passerby he hails.

The rhetorical arsenal employed by the periodical writers could also be turned against them. As writers for publication, they too could be the objects of performative characterisations enacted by others without their consent. Periodical writers mostly sought to protect themselves from this kind of unwelcome attention behind a screen of anonymity, and by cultivating the corporate identity of the magazine. There were many complaints about the asymmetry this

created. Coleridge grumbled in *Biographia Literaria* that periodical writers were ‘no longer to be questioned without exposing the complainant to ridicule, because, forsooth, they are *anonymous* critics, and authorised as “synodical individuals” to speak of themselves *plurali majestatico!*’ (I, 42).⁴ But anonymity was never perfect and often penetrable, as those periodical writers who took part in duels knew very well. Rhetorical counter-attacks were more common than duels; more common, and no less fatal, at least for the professional identity of the periodical writer. Creatures of writing, made out of language, they could be unmade in language too.

This annihilation in language was what *Blackwood's* threatened for Leigh Hunt and the Cockney School, what the *Quarterly* threatened for Keats and what the *Edinburgh* threatened for Wordsworth. It didn't physically kill any of them – despite Shelley's suggestion in the ‘Preface’ to *Adonais* that the *Quarterly* was directly responsible for Keats's death – but if fully successful it would have silenced them as published writers (Shelley, 390-392). Controversy was good for sales (Francis Jeffrey wrote ‘to be learned and right is no doubt the first requisite –but to be ingenious and original and discursive is perhaps more than the second in a publication which can only do good by remaining popular’ (qtd Christie 29)) and so the periodicals had a vested interest in prolonging hostilities rather than winning outright. But when the parties were sworn political enemies, they sought to destroy each other's authority, as well as each other's livelihood.

Once their self-authorising style was established, the periodicals became a powerful institution shaping and policing Romantic literary culture. William Hazlitt accused William Gifford, editor of the *Quarterly*, of being ‘the Government critic [...] the invisible link that connects literature with the police’ (Hazlitt, IX, 13). But the periodicals aspired to patrol literary culture not as special constables but as vigilantes who detected wrongdoing, passed sentence and inflicted punishment all at once. If the *Blackwood's* attacks on Leigh Hunt had been fully successful, if they had dictated the dominant characterisation of him in the public mind, then they would have been more effective as sanctions against him than the prison sentence imposed on him by the courts. Prison did not silence Hunt, who continued to edit the *Examiner* from his cell, and it raised his credibility by making him a martyr. *Blackwood's* sought to discredit him by ridiculing him and labelling him as immoral. They aimed, then, for a kind of authority that not only existed without the support of legal authority, but actually surpassed legal authority to reach where the law could not. For this reason, I think Nicholas Roe is mistaken, in his

biography of Hunt, to dwell on Hunt's imprisonment but to dismiss the Cockney School essays in a paragraph (306). The essays were in fact a greater threat to Hunt's literary and political programme than the prison. In some cases, at least, periodicals policed the literary sphere more effectively than the police themselves.

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¹ Blackstone acknowledges that prosecutions for libel are rare where the substance of the libel is acknowledged to be true by the plaintiff, and that the truth of a libel may extenuate the offence, even in the criminal law (p. 151).

² Austin specifies insults as a kind of performative that cannot be reduced to such an explicit form (pp. 68-69).

³ Austin discusses duelling on p. 27.

⁴ Coleridge takes the phrase 'synodical individuals' from Andrew Marvell's *The Rehearsal Transpros'd*.